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Viet Nam's Ragged, Rugged Action Teams

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Where PATs Are Blows to Reds

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SAIGON—As freedom fighters, their appearance leaves much to be desired. They range in age from 15 to 50. Few are outstanding physical specimens. Some have only one eye, others are missing their trigger fingers. Twenty per cent of them are women.

To the disgust of the military, they don't salute. They would never win any prizes at close-order drill. Their most prized uniform is black pajamas, the sackcloth of the Vietnamese peasant. They wear no insignia of rank.

A bright young American captain who was sent out to look them over came back to Saigon totally unimpressed. Some soldiers, he reported. All they do is stand around and yak and sweep floors and yak and repair bridges and yak and bathe babies and yak and work in the rice paddies and yak.

Yet this ragged army of undersized civilians is one of the chief hopes of winning the Vietnamese war and building a nation where none existed before.

They are a terror to the Viet Cong, a pillar of strength to the much-abused Vietnamese peasant and the pride of the Americans who helped create the force.

Until something better comes along, they are the answer to Communist-run "wars of national liberation." Their potential extends far beyond the borders of Viet Nam. For, if they succeed here—and they have—there is no good reason why they shouldn't succeed in other underdeveloped countries where Communist insurgency rears its head.

They are the People's Action Teams, 40-man bands of highly motivated, heavily armed, anti-Communist fighters who double as destroyers and builders, killers and do-gooders.

To those who know them best they are the PATs. They are the core of the massive pacification program that was a primary topic of conversation during President Johnson's talks with South Vietnamese leaders in Honolulu this week.

Today there are nearly 20,000 PAT members in South Viet Nam. By the end of the war, there will be 30,000. They are being turned out of the training camps at a rate of 4,000 every 10 weeks.

Their primary function is to move into "gray" areas after allied military forces have driven main-force Viet Cong units out and then to reclaim the area for the Saigon government. It is a slow and tedious process and it is a source of concern

to Americans backing the program that the United States may expect too much too soon.

IN A COUNTRY that is littered with discarded plans for winning the war, the PATs are unique. They are a success, perhaps the only success the Americans can claim in a war better known for its failures.

Perhaps the best testimonial to the success of the PAT program is the elbowing and jostling that goes on at team meetings in Saigon as various U.S. agencies try to take credit for it.

Each agency—the embassy, the U.S. military command, the U.S. Agency for International Development mission, the U.S. Information Service—has had a hand in the pie. But it is the Central Intelligence Agency that inspired and backed the program from the start and, equally important, put up the money for it.

CIA is curiously demure about its role in the PAT program. Its passion for anonymity struggles with a desire for recognition for a job well done. There is also the fear that if the CIA role is known, similar counterinsurgency campaigns that might be undertaken in other countries would be viewed as something sinister because of the CIA label.

The fact is that everyone who knows anything about the PAT program knows that CIA is behind it.

"FOR YEARS WE HAVE been looking for the handle, the gimmick or whatever you want to call it, to Communist insurgency," said a CIA man. "It was there all along but we failed to recognize it."

He was referring to the fact that the PAT program is a shameless steal from Communist guerrilla warfare, turned against the very men who perfected it.

This worries the Americans not at all. Says Frank Scotton, a bright and brash 27-year-old from Needham, Mass., who played a key role in making the PATs what they are today:

"After all, the Communists stole the atomic bomb from us. Why should we be squeamish about stealing people's warfare from them?"

The PATs are taught to kill—but with love rather than hate. It is immoral to kill with hate, they are told.

The eight principles Mao Tze-tung enunciated for the Chinese Communists' celebrated long march have been lifted bodily. They are:

- Speak politely and truthfully.
- Pay a fair price for what you buy.

Continued



A typical member of the Vietnamese People's Action Team.
Taught to kill with love rather than hate

- Return everything you borrow.
- Pay for anything you damage.
- Don't mistreat the people.
- Don't damage crops.
- Don't rape the women.
- Treat captives kindly.

"If there was a copyright on this sort of thing we could get sued," says Scotton.

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